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ABSTRACT

Many at-risk student intervention programs are not affordable for small rural schools. The Cooperative Alternative Program (CAP), a cooperative dropout prevention program administered by six western Texas rural school districts, is described in this report. The program is designed to meet graduation requirements, teach vocational skills, provide social services, and share financial responsibility. CAP has also had the following effects: positive economic impact, renovation of abandoned school facilities, increased business community cooperation, decreased discipline problems, and increased parent involvement. (6 references) (LMI)

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COOPERATIVE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM: A PLAN FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION

INTRODUCTION

Among the fads, catch-words, and trends which have endured education reform is the decade of the 1980's one has stood paramount and promises to dominate the 1990's. The catch-word is "at-risk". It describes one of the most serious threats facing American society. Scores of American youth are unable to complete their high school educations and consequently swell the ranks of the unemployed, the indignant, the welfare recipients, and the incarcerated. Each year the American middle class grows smaller. Taxpayers are faced with the ever increasing burden of providing for the needs of a growing nation in a changing world. In addition, the millions each year who do not finish school, not only drain the system, but are unable to contribute to the tax base which supports it.

Critics accuse the public schools of ignoring the crisis. Lawmakers point fingers at school officials and make changes of inefficiency and incompetence. Mandates are handed down to compel schools to deal with the problem. It may truly be said that schools reflect society. One must consider that these "at-risk" students come from an "at-risk" society; likewise, many of the schools' critics prefer to bury their heads in the sand when financial resources are called for to combat the problem. It is cheaper to point the finger of blame at others.

Regardless of who bares the blame for the "at-risk" problem, the fact remains that more and more youngsters fall victim to this plague of society with each passing day. Schools impact and affect more youth than any other of society's vehicles. Schools must address the problem - but they must also be prepared to address the financial burden. Urban and suburban schools, having larger populations, may be at some advantage in providing services to "at-risk" students in a cost effective manner. Small schools, however, and especially those in sparsely populated regions of the country may find that providing

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meaningful "at-risk" services to a very few students is extremely expensive when compared to urban and suburban neighbors. Each day that passes without effective intervention condemns more children to illiteracy and poverty.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nationally, the dropout rate has been 25% and has been for the past thirty years (Hahn;1987). Population surveys and research reports document that for the past two decades school dropouts are nearly equally divided between males (55% to 53%) and females (45% to 47%). Researchers agree that dropping out of school is the result of the compound impact of many different kinds of problems (Ekstrom;1987). Students from low socioeconomic family status are much more likely to dropout of school than their economically advantaged peers and students living in poverty are also more susceptible to variations in school quality. Family background has a very powerful impact on the creation of "at-risk" students, especially if the family is of low socioeconomic status (Rumburger;1983).

Given the backgrounds and problems students bring to school with them, many are unable to function in traditional settings. Research has established that school climate contributes to the dropping out of students when there is traditional emphasis on rules, policies, and regulations. Students with other pressures may not be able to cope with such structure (McDill;1987). Students who dropout are twice as likely to have been suspended the previous year as compared to students who remain in school (Wheelock;1986). Research findings indicate that many teachers treat high and low achieving students differently; areas of different treatment include seating, amount of attention, questioning and participation patterns, amount of quality feedback and expectations for the amount and quality of student work (Good;1981). In general many students come into schools with a predisposition of failure and the traditional school setting may be a contributing factor to their eventual failure.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Legislature of the State of Texas recently past a law that charged each school district in the state to provide programs for "at-risk" students. This legislation

created a difficult problem for many rural districts in the state. These districts had neither the funds nor the number of students necessary to produce a meaningful "at-risk" program.

Six school superintendents in rural West Texas met and decided to combine resources in a cooperative effort to meet the mandates of the "at-risk" legislation and more importantly to provide a program that would make a difference in youngster's lives. The districts formed (CAP) Cooperative Alternative Program. The cooperative was able to secure funding through both the state and federal grants. With these funds and the funds that each district committed to the project the concept became a reality in the 1988-89 school year.

PROGRAM DESIGN

The Cooperative Alternative Program was designed to give "at-risk" students and dropouts a second chance to complete their education in a setting that makes allowances for and provides needed social service to youth with special needs. Students ages 14 and over may be recommended by their home school for placement at the alternative campus. The school is a cooperative between six school districts. This arrangement provides a sufficient number of students and financial resources to make real and meaningful intervention possible. When students are received at CAP, they make a minimum one year commitment. Many students choose to remain for longer periods because of the success they are having. Academic curriculum is a competency-based program that allows students to experience success by working at their own level and pace. Elective courses are vocational. The philosophy behind the curriculum arrangement is to provide the basic academic requirements for graduation and a real vocational skill that can be used for gainful employment.

In addition to specialized curriculum, the school also provides several other services especially designed for "at-risk" youth. A full-time, free day care is available on campus for the children of students. In addition, parenting courses are taught for all students who utilize the service. A full-time counselor is available to deal with real life personal problems of students. The counselor also conducts parent training at night to help parents of "at-risk" youth to deal with the behavior of their children. Also, a peer assistance program allows all students to develop a sense of collegiality. Class size is limited to ten students per

teacher. This perhaps is the most significant aspect of the program. Discipline is very structured and exact, yet fair and equal. These practices help create a warm, caring and positive school climate. Students are expected to achieve and do achieve. Conflicting social values such as hair length, male earrings, and cultural differences are down played so that negative impacts of such are minimized.

The program is affordable to the participating schools. The cooperative nature helps spread financial burden and risk and helps prevent duplication of programs. Grants and grant information for such programs can be found at state education offices, private industry council, and The Federal Register.

RESULTS

The program at this writing is beginning its second year of operation. The first year was clearly a success. The initial enrollment was seventy-four scholastics. Approximately 30% of these students were already dropouts. The rest of the students met the state criteria and local district criteria for "at-risk" students. Sixty-two of the original enrollees remained in school for the term. Eight graduated at the end of the term. These eight students are presently involved in the following manner: Three continued their education in post secondary institutions, two entered the armed forces and the remaining three are gainfully employed. The second year of operation has seen the enrollment increase to one hundred and twenty scholastics, with a potential graduation class of twenty-four.

From a purely practical point of view one would suggest the following:

1. The program has given a number of young men and women a second chance at education.
2. The impact of $600,000.00 in state and federal grants has had a positive effect on the depressed economy of the area.
3. The program renovated and placed back into operation one of the many abandoned schools in the area.
4. The individualized instruction, vocational courses and the day care center deal effectively with many of the problems that force students out of traditional schooling.
5. The involvement of a lay board of directors from the six school districts has created a broad base of support for the program and an attitude of cooperation between the school and the local business community.

6. The disciplinary problems at the local school have decreased significantly, and because the students at CAP are experiencing success, discipline on that campus is not a significant problem.
7. Parents who had ceased involvement with local school systems because they were tired of hearing how "bad" their kids were are actively involved with the CAP program.
8. The program can be easily replicated in other rural settings across the country.

CONCLUSIONS

Although many worthy programs exist to deal with "at-risk" students, many are not affordable for small, rural schools. A cooperative effort is a sensible and meaningful way to provide needed services. Clearly, small schools must meet the challenge of "at-risk" youth. It is not a problem that will simply disappear in the future; rather, it is one that will grow and consume our society if forsighted educators do not rise and meet the challenge.

The dropout phenonmenon is not endemic to the metropolitan school systems. It is and has always been a problem in rural areas. The CAP approach is one that can intervene and break the cycle of welfare existance for a significant minority of rural students.

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